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Hearts into the Game

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As they pound down the metal steps of the bus, they thank the driver for a safe ride. When they hand their balled-up uniforms to equipment manager Tony Robbins, they say thank you again. Titans head coach Mia Smith expects that of her players, as much as she expects them to box out and scramble for every loose ball.

Maybe it comes from her small-town upbringing but she insists her team is known for something more than an outstanding record or a silky title banner.

“Whatever puddle they stick their foot in, I want them to always be known as the most polite, the most gracious women around,” she says. “Every time the trainer gives them a treatment, they say thank you and every time Tony does their laundry, they say thank you. Those are all small parts of basketball but they make a difference.”

And she’s into the small things, the nuances, so much so that she attends high school proms and graduations to watch recruits, to begin to be a part of their lives.

“I want to get to know the kids in a different light than basketball,” she says.

And they get to know her, this all-time victories leader for Illinois Wesleyan University women’s basketball, who bakes thick brownies and fruit pizza for her players when they’ve had a good game.

And when they haven’t.

When she came to Shirk Athletic Center Arena 10 years ago, she counted 50 fans in the stands. In contrast, more than 300 fans attended a February home game against conference rival North Central.

“Our team is very successful and I think they’re fun to watch,” Smith says. “They provide a lot of excitement.”

One of her biggest fans is her 85-year-old grandmother, Philena Steele of Effingham, who used to worry about her granddaughter staying in hotel rooms with outside doors. A small, framed photo of her sits next to the coach’s phone, a woman with ruddy cheeks and silver curls who often travels to Bloomington to sit behind the bench and urge on the 16 ponytailed players.



Team co-captain Crystal Dye '08 is a blur of motion on the court.

In the summer, Smith retreats to Effingham to spend long days with her grandmother and parents, Sonny and Sandy Smith, along with her three younger brothers and their families. Sometimes she takes over a farmhouse kitchen and cooks for the entire family. Before the family orchard was sold, she used to prune and spray apple trees.

Above her desk is a collage of seven nieces and nephews — a chubby baby, a flower girl, thumb-sized school pictures.

“I love it,” she says of her family time. “It has to be the thing I enjoy the most.”

After basketball?

“Even more,” she says.

She grew up in Farina in rural, Southern Illinois, a community with a grain elevator, 650 people “and 600 dawgs,” Smith says, drawing out that last word like she was home again. On July nights, no matter how thick the air was, her mom was in the backyard, crouching behind home plate.

“She caught each one of us, every night,” she says. “She was the epitome of what a sports mom should be. I think that’s where I get my rah-rah-ness. She’s always been so positive. Dad coached us on mental toughness.”

Although her athletic brothers didn’t ask for their sister’s coaching, sometimes they got it.



At halftime, (above) the coach challenges her team to play with “effort and heart.” She says she inherited her competitive spirit from her family.

“I did not officially coach them,” she says, with a smile. “But I’d throw in my two cents. Everything was competitive in my home, even who could eat the fastest.”

Although her class at LaGrove High School in Farina only had 28 students, there was a bench full of girls who drew attention on the basketball court.

“We were small but we were very, very good,” she says. “We were quick.”

And Smith likes quick. Just about as much as she likes the three-pointer, which she calls the equivalent of the

dunk in men's basketball. But if there's one thing the coach doesn't like, it's lack of effort.

"Lack of effort, lack of hustle is my pet peeve," she says. "No matter how talented you are, those are things you can do. If another team gets a loose ball, that bothers me."

When she reviews game films, she's not just critiquing players. She's judging herself, her reactions. She thinks she needs to be a little more subdued but that's hard in a game she's been emotionally invested in for so long.

At Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, she was a four-year letterwinner in basketball and softball. A team captain, defensive player of the year and sportsmanship award-winner, she also found a permanent spot on the Dean's List.

Her first coaching job was at Carrollton High School, Ill., where she took her basketball teams to state before moving on to Division III Monmouth College, Ill., coaching volleyball and softball. Smith joined IWU's faculty in 1998. In February, she received a promotion, from assistant to associate professor of physical education.

At Wesleyan, coaches are equally concerned about driving students toward success in the classroom. Athletes are students first, which means Smith has to eye recruits in a different light than big schools. Before she gets serious about a player, she goes over academic scores. If the player doesn't meet the admission standards, she moves on.

But she wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love this school. I think it's an incredible place — the balance between academics and athletics. ... I feel like I'm in an environment that will do whatever it can to help me be a success and for the girls to be successful. And they're so supportive of each other. It is not about who starts, who scores or who does not; it is about the end result — did the team win?"

Every year, the team's goals are the same: to win the College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW) title and move onto the National Collegiate Athletic Association Tournament. She'd like to win a national championship but if not, "my life has been very complete and very satisfying," Smith says. "I've coached some incredible women and they've all made an impact on my life."

And she's only 43.

Her morning always starts the same, with a 6:30 a.m. jog. On a recent day, that was followed by a cup of yogurt and a "diet Dew" before she headed out to teach an 8 a.m. class. Besides physical education, she teaches fencing and golf. She says she gives herself a day off when she physically can't go

any longer.

At game time, there is no nervousness. It's just not there. But she does say a silent prayer. A sports devotional bible sits on her desk, uneven slips of paper marking the pages.

Illinois Wesleyan Athletic Director Dennie Bridges '61 saw something in Smith the other applicants didn't have when he interviewed her a decade ago.

"I felt she had that little extra to bring our women's basketball to a championship level and she's everything I hoped for. I'm just thrilled with how she works with her players, how much she loves them and how hard they work for her. And — winning helps," he says with a chuckle. "We're on a good streak now and it's not going to end."

Bridges, who retired as head men's basketball coach in 2001 after 36 seasons, describes her coaching style as "exciting," and says she's boosted his appreciation for women's sports.

"Players want to come here and play for her because she plays a full-court game, presses all over the floor defensively, fast breaks and seldom questions shot selection," says Bridges. "It's fun to play basketball the way she plays it and it's also turned out to be a winning style."

Smith's coaching style also fit Kate (Cantrell) Allaria '03 of Edwardsville. She was in Mia's first recruiting class and led the team in scoring in the 2002-03 season, the same year they won the CCIW title and went on to win the Titan's first-ever game at an NCAA Division III tournament.

"She likes to live and die by the three-pointer and that was fine by me," she says.

Allaria recalls Smith as a coach who treated players like family, like the time when twin players lost their grandmother and she drove team members to the visitation more than two hours away. She also remembers Smith as a coach who was passionate about the game and could get "pretty emotional," when she came off the bench.

Some of that emotion was shown one afternoon in January during a close game with North Central College in Naperville, Ill. Closer than Smith thought it should have been.

"Are you serious?" she says, after a player threw the ball away.

Down by two points at the half, she rushes ahead of the team to the locker room. As they lean against the lockers, shoulders slumped, Smith got down on their level and started in.

"I'm going to take credit for the two three pointers but how many turnovers have we had?"

The room is silent, save for Smith's voice. Clearly, she is frustrated, but she delivers her message rapidly and in an even tone, always in control.

"The problem to me right now is lack of effort. I don't see it out of you and I can't find five people I'm comfortable with right now. I can't find five people who want to play. I just don't see effort on anything. Are you fatigued or what? Are we boxing out? The only really good boxout I've seen is from their team. Are we aiming for contact with the body to keep them off the boards? We've done some stupid stuff. Put the ball down and go hard. Get to the paint and set your picks." She pauses, letting her words set in.

"It's about effort. When you come to the bench, I'm hearing excuses. When you start throwing excuses, that means you're lacking confidence and you don't want to work. This is about you. It's not about drawing things on the board. It's about you and how bad you want to win games. The only thing that matters to me now is effort and heart. If I see effort and heart, you're going to play. If I don't see effort and heart, you're not.

"Coaches — anything else?" asks Smith, referring to her assistants.

They shake their heads, indicating that the coach has said it all.



Smith's brother Shannon brings his three children for a courtside visit with their doting Aunt Mia.

“Find a way,” she says as she walks out. “You have one minute to yourselves.”

After a few seconds, the players huddle and respond to Smith’s challenge with a succession of shouts. “Let’s get all those loose balls! Let’s get all the rebounds! Let’s go! Let’s make a change!”

They returned to the floor a different team, shooting 62 percent from the field in the final half and forcing their opponents into 20 total turnovers. The final score: 82-66. Despite the improvement, Smith clearly feels her players won “ugly” this time and need to play with better consistency and more intensity in the weeks ahead.

Their coach’s one-two combination of high expectations and unconditional support agrees with her players. Junior Mallory Heydorn stepped out on the floor as a less-than-confident freshman. Smith told her she was going to play and she did. Now she’s averaging 13 points per game.

“I have become a better player and stronger person because of what she has expected of me,” Heydorn says. “She motivates us by expecting more from us than we each think is possible. She has more faith in our team than I think a lot of coaches do. She is always very proud of us but, at the same time, she lets us know that there is always more we can do.”

As the players stroll out of the locker room, a few at a time, they head for the bus, which will take them to the home of a player’s parents for dinner. Their coach follows in her SUV.



The Titans (above) celebrate a 80-63 win against conference foe Carthage at a February home game.

First-year student Jessica Hinterlong’s parents, Jack and Gail, meet them at the door. A banner stretched across the front porch reading “Welcome Lady Titans, Players and Coaches — Go Titans!” flaps in a strong, January wind. Inside, shoes are kicked off and the hungry, young women pile their plates high with barbecue. The seating is arranged like a big, holiday family gathering, players seated in one room, and the “adults” (parents and coaches) seated at a nearby table. As the Titans take their places at a long, kitchen table and twist caps off their Snapples, not a word is uttered about the game. Instead, they rave about the cheesy potatoes and laugh when senior guard Sarah Bull, who scored 22 points that day, recalls some guys she knew who caught catfish with their bare hands.

About an hour later, Smith sweeps through the kitchen, like a mom getting her kids rounded up after a birthday party.

“Are we about ready? Make sure we clean up after ourselves.”

As her players climb back onto the bus, Smith gives them a big wave and a smile as she opens the door to her SUV. It’s a Saturday night and she is on her way to a high school game to watch a recruit who she hopes will be joining her team next season.

Inside the bus, one of the players pops in a movie and the victorious players draw their fleece blankets around them, hug their pillows and slide comfortably into their seats for the two-hour ride back to Bloomington.

The bus pulled away.

And the coach drove on.

Editor's Note: This story was written prior to March 7, when Smith's team hosted IWU's first-ever NCAA Division III women's tournament game, defeating Maryville, Mo., 111-77 before falling in the second round to Wisconsin–Whitewater. The team finished with a 26-3 record, a school record for season wins, and a 16-game winning streak that is also a school mark. In a message to fans, Smith wrote: "Over 1,300 attended each game of the regional tournament and seeing that kind of support is a dream come true for the players and me. I truly believe they played their best because they were trying to say 'Thank you' for coming out to see them play."